



Volume 10
Issue 1 *Poetry*

December 2020

Audre Lorde: Intersectionality and Anti-Racism Work through Poetry in a White Small-Town Context

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Recommended Citation

Daniels, Emily A. and Thomas, Helen I. (2021) "Audre Lorde: Intersectionality and Anti-Racism Work through Poetry in a White Small-Town Context," *Organizational Aesthetics*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, 44-47.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/oa/vol10/iss1/11>

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About the Work:

This short article describes a collaborative, grant-funded effort to explore anti-racism through the works of Audre Lorde. The piece presents some background on Lorde, situates the work in a small-town White context, and offers suggestions for those interested in pursuing this effort.

About the Authors:

Emily A. Daniels, PhD has over 20 years of experience in teaching and training in private and public education in the US and abroad. Her academic publishing has focused on race and inequality within the educational arena and her interests include critical theories, women's leadership, and storytelling pedagogy.

Helen I. Thomas has a background in corporate Human Resources and has served academic institutions as an educator, grants writer, and administrator. She is also an author and after retiring from two different universities is quite happy with her retirement position as Director of her local library.

Audre Lorde: Intersectionality and Anti-Racism Work through Poetry in a White Small-Town Context

In the Fall of 2019, before the world had changed, I had the good fortune to enter into a partnership with a small-town library to present an arts-based social justice workshop. We applied for and received a Humanities New York Grant for the development and implementation of in-depth discussions around the poetry of Audre Lorde.

In full disclosure, my library collaborator is also my mother. We had discussed these grant possibilities and wanted to share knowledge and justice work in this traditionally conservative environment. We had not discovered an appropriate mechanism until the opportunity to use poetry arose in the form of this grant. Audre Lorde wrote on topics of justice and intersectionality in the 1960s and 70s in a world that was (and still is) sharply divided. Embracing her intersectional identities, she referred to herself as a “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” (poetry foundation.org).

Background

Lorde was born in Harlem in 1934 after the Harlem Renaissance, at the epicenter of Black cultural, intellectual, and artistic power. She was diagnosed as legally blind at a young age, and was considered “wildish” (De Veaux, 2004, p. 18) by her parents. Her outspokenness emerged early; she entered school in a Catholic institution and questioned and challenged the nuns in her Kindergarten year (De Veaux, 2004). She refused submission or compliance, and this was a lifelong trait. One of her most famous quotes is, “Your silence will not protect you” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 41). This emerged in the context of reflecting on her diagnosis with breast cancer, and the many silences that we all subject ourselves to for fear of social reprisal. When faced with death, she realized the foolishness of these self-censoring moments, and highlighted the need to use our voices in solidarity.

Development

Contrasting the intense, artistic, and complex life of Audre Lorde within a rural library in a predominantly conservative White town, we entered into dialogues around race, racism, sexism, and sexuality through the lens of Audre Lorde’s work and poetry.

We had several books provided by the Humanities New York Grant (borrowed) and I developed a syllabus and incorporated additional resources as needed. We had a total of four meetings, which lasted roughly 1.5 hours each. Many of the points I made concerning racism were based on statistics to demonstrate that yes indeed, racism does still exist in the United States. In fact, it is deeply entrenched in US society and has connections to other forms of oppression like sexism and classism. After many years of doing social justice work, I had realized that my audience must shape my approach. Considering the context and location, I had assumed that my participants had little exposure to systemic and social issues surrounding racism, sexism, heterosexism, and their interconnections. This assumption proved to be true, and after one meeting we lost a group member who commented on the outside that the material was “too political”.

Experience

The audience was thoughtfully cultivated and developed in advance to consist of a variety of ages and social locations in the town. Many were already quite open to the possibilities of change, and all attendees were White. We averaged roughly 7-9 attendees per session.

We dove into the dialogue through the standpoint of social justice. I always utilize statistics, history, and academic literature to challenge my audience to rethink the meritocracy. We integrated Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality (2017), and I drew on the fantastic *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (2013) text as well.

Lorde's visionary poetry and essays were then integrated through "homework" sessions, and often lively group discussions (with a range of implications) resulted. There were times when it felt like perspectives and insights were emerging, and there were other times where my Mother noted "You are getting red" (which for me means passionate and intense and sometimes I have been told "intimidating"). In addition, there were times where I would see "backwards movement", when entrenched beliefs resurfaced.

One of the most intense and memorable discussions was after reading *The Cancer Journals*, (2006) where Lorde delved into her experiences with health "care" as a Black woman. The issues of cruelty, lack of care, and fear were interwoven powerfully in this book. There was honest insight from a group member who shared her own experiences with breast cancer, and the resulting mastectomy. Filtering this back through the lens of race was important here, and this was something I continued to emphasize. Our experiences are shaped by gender, but also by our race, class, and other social identities which value some lives much more than others.

I chose Lorde's poems deliberately and they could easily be tied to current social challenges; however, interpretations and understandings varied widely. One of the points we collectively came to was that there are many ways we see and "feel" poems.

Implementation

The deliberate choice of texts is important, as this provides ways to center the discussion. Additionally, injustice and oppression often need "proving" to people from dominant identities or cultures. While this is incredibly unfair, it is true. Starting with statistics and providing evidence of inequalities sets the foundation for further understanding.

Sister Outsider (Lorde, 1984/2007) could be a useful starting point. These speeches and essays often provide insights on the power of her work in short chapters for busy individuals. Reading her biography (De Veaux, 2004) would also be another option. This provides a clear picture of the many facets of her life and activism. While reading her poems, allowing for multiple interpretations and rich discussion is vital. Finally, engaging a skilled facilitator who is familiar with social justice and diversity work, well informed about resources, and able to handle difficult discussions is crucial.

Engaging in poetry as social justice work can provide an unexpected space to dialogue about inequalities and racism. Audre Lorde's work is both timeless and deeply moving, and inspirational in its continued relevance.

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